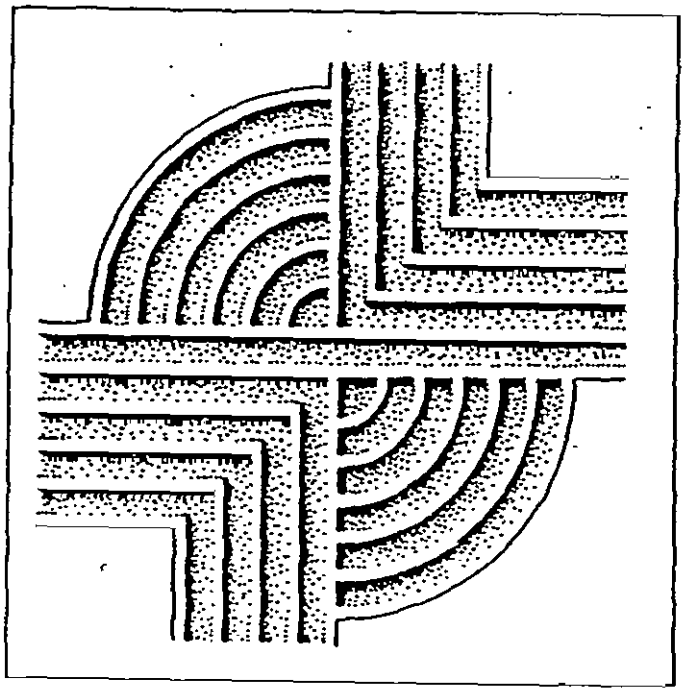
DISCUSSING THE ARCHAEOLOGIST'S ROLE IN PUBLIC INTERPRETATION



RESEARCH CONTRIBUTION 75

DISCUSSING THE ARCHAEOLOGIST'S ROLE IN PUBLIC INTERPRETATION

Michael Trinkley

Chicora Research Contribution 75

Chicora Foundation, Inc.
PO Box 8664 ▫ 861 Arbutus Drive
Columbia, South Carolina 29202
803/787-6910

Comments presented as discussant for Session 39:
The Archaeologist's Role in Public Interpretation,
Society for Historical Archaeology Symposium, Kingston, Jamaica
January 11, 1992

January 1992

First, I apologize for my absence. I had looked forward to being with you and meeting many of you for the first time. I also realize it is disappointing to have a discussant's comments "canned," but I hope that at least a few of my observations will in part make up for my absence. And, since you have already heard Parker Potter's paper on displacement, I will refrain from making any further comments on that topic.

Second, I want to thank the National Park Service, and particularly John Jameson, for both holding this session, and for inviting me to participate. The issues involved in what we are calling public interpretation, are vital to our discipline and I am honored to be involved. Further, since I am the director of a public, non-profit foundation, quite a bit of our work involves the public, education, interpretation, and so forth. Consequently, I have given some thought to subject. In addition, I have had the added advantage of reading all but two of the papers presented here today, so I have been able to digest the thoughts and issues. An example of the whole truly being greater than the sum of the parts.

And third, I want to thank the authors who provided me with advance copies of their papers. While I recognize that this process, as one author commented, removes the spontaneity, it certainly helps me appear to be more quick witted than perhaps I am.

The papers today have covered a tremendous amount of ground. Some have explored issues with considerable insight and depth, others in a more tentative and preliminary fashion. But all, and I mean this sincerely, are excellent and well worth publication by the National Park Service.

Since you have been assaulted by a variety of statistics and studies, I hope you will forgive me for adding a few more:

- a 1991 National Trust for Historic Preservation market survey found that "historic preservation" ranked very low in public concern or interest, and

- the demographics of the historic preservation movement reveal interested individuals are about 50 years old, married, have an average household income in excess of $99,000, over two-thirds have a professional degree, a third have a postgraduate degree, and nearly half own a second home or other real estate as an investment.

These two items alone point to the seriousness of the task confronting us -- historic

preservation is the interest of the wealthy elite and the general public sees many more pressing issues than preserving "old things." All of which emphasizes that we need to make the past accessible, in the words of Karen Davis, and that we also need to educate the public on why archaeology is important.

As several authors have noted, archaeology -- and in a general sense, all aspects of heritage preservation -- has economic incentives. Plainly put, **preservation is good business**:

> ▪ each visitor to a museum in a metropolitan area will contribute between $60 and $75 directly to the economy, visitors to suburban or rural museums contribute $10 to $15 directly, and the multiplier effect for both is between 6 and 8;
>
> ▪ each $1 million in direct spending generates about 39 new jobs in the local economy;
>
> ▪ looking at historic structures, rehabilitation can save about 4% over the cost of new construction, but with the added savings of reducing construction time by up to 18% -- translating into interest savings and earlier receipt of income;
>
> ▪ two studies conducted by the University of South Carolina and the National League of Cities found historic preservation to be one of the best economic development tools, ranking seventh of 45 different tools; and
>
> ▪ tourism ranks as the first or second industry in 41 of the 50 states and represents 6% of the gross national product -- and a *Southern Living* poll found that historic sites are number one on the agenda of its readers when they go touring and very high on the list compiled by the National Tour Association.

And it is important to add to this economic analysis the intangible benefits which accrue to a developer undertaking "CRM" or "compliance" archaeology -- one of which is excellent public relations. A favorable newspaper article which is picked up even by the regional AP wire provides a client with benefits that simply can't be bought, for any price.

Everything from fast foods to presidential candidates are sold to the American public through marketing. Archaeologists have been slow to learn, and accept, marketing strategies and techniques, perhaps feeling that such mundane matters will pollute the intellectual purity of the discipline, or maybe uncomfortable with such unabashed capitalistic endeavors. Regardless, if there is one single lesson in both these papers today

and my own experience, it is that we must all learn much more about the fine art of marketing ourselves and our product.

It was intriguing to me, given our Foundation's work in both archaeology and museum studies, how many issues raised today either have been, or which still are, major topics of debate in the museum community. These include the viability of different exhibit types and concepts, how to convey some sense of the exhibition's purpose, and, ultimately, how to decide which of the many "truths" are presented. Dr. Potter's suggestion that we let the public decide if it likes, or agrees with, an interpretation of the past. While I have reservations about this approach, I also feel that history is replete with "untidy complexities," and as professionals we are bound to offer the public an awareness that sometimes, even among professionals, a consensus is not possible. I must admit to some surprise --even disappointment -- that no author came forward to offer an examination of the exhibit, "First Encounters," or evaluate its success or failure as interpreting the past and educating the public.

Also related to museum practice are the several papers which mentioned "visitor surveys." More often referred to as "exit surveys" in the museum community, we see a fine blend of professional museum practice and marketing analysis, the goal being to determine visitor attitudes. Such surveys are based on neutrally worded questions, careful pretesting, and scrupulous honesty.

I was surprised to learn from Kristen Stevens that visitor surveys at Steamtown were prohibited by Federal regulations. We are fortunate that *The Washington Post* did not discover that information -- I wince at the possible headlines. I noted that Carl Kuttruff and Joe Distretti, after outlining an series of excellently reasoned interpretative goals, state that these goals were achieved, based on "visitors comments." I would have liked to learn more about the survey methodology used and how these comments have been interpreted to evidence the success of the interpretation. Regardless of my skepticism regarding the survey, their six conclusions are particularly valid and worthy of special attention.

Moving on to "education," I was gratified to note that at least two authors -- Margaret Heath and Diane Gelburd -- emphasize the interaction between science, math, and archaeology. Chicora Foundation and the Center for Science Education at the University of South Carolina have a grant proposal being reviewed which would emphasize the place of the humanities in teaching elementary school sciences and math. And the education literature provides additional support; for example indicating that kids learn better on field trips than in the static classroom -- perhaps an example of "experiential education" -- and where better to take a field trip than to an archaeological sites.

It is very important that we remember that from 4 to 14 are the formative years in childhood development. Their perceptions of themselves, and the world around them,

form in these 10 short years. We have a 10 year "window of opportunity." We all need to carefully evaluate how successfully our educational campaigns target and engage this group. I would argue that 90% of our efforts, no less, should be directed toward kids -- they represent our "hope for the future."

And finally, it occurs to me that we should also carefully weigh the place of archaeology, and our interpretation of archaeology, in the larger picture. Chicora Foundation has argued for a "new environmentalism;" a recognition that our environment is multidimensional. It is composed of air, earth, and water, as well as our cultural environment. Just as our natural environment can be damaged or destroyed, making the world less hospitable, so too can the loss of our heritage diminish the quality of our lives. And the quality of the world we leave to our children.

I see several sites that are taking this opportunity to link cultural and natural environmental issues. I wonder if Steamtown didn't miss an opportunity to study the industrial revolution's disregard for the environment, confronting environmental and hazardous waste issues squarely, and making archaeology an ally of environmental causes.

Related to the place of archaeology in the environmental movement, are questions I have about the development of historic parks such as Hassel Island. While I am an ardent supporter of heritage education and heritage tourism, both must be done in a manner that contributes to the community and protects the natural ecology. What impact will tourists, toilets, and commercialism have on the environment of Hassel Island? And what conservation and preservation standards will be used to allow the badly deteriorating Creque Marine to be converted into an operating boat yard? My point is not to question the National Park Service, but to remind all of us that archaeology is but one player in the much larger preservation game.

As Donovan Rypkema observed, "I would suggest that we have already consumed enough of somebody's else's assets -- it's time for us to make better use of our own. Historic preservation is the way for us to do that."

Again, thank you for inviting me and your kindness in listening to my few simple observations.